

# Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis

<http://eeпа.аera.net>

---

## Adoption and Adaptation: School District Responses to State Imposed Learning and Graduation Requirements

John W. Sipple, Kieran Killeen and David H. Monk

*EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION AND POLICY ANALYSIS* 2004; 26; 143

DOI: 10.3102/01623737026002143

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://eeпа.sagepub.com>

---

Published on behalf of



American  
Educational  
Research  
Association

<http://www.aera.net>

By



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://eeпа.аera.net/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://eeпа.аera.net/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.aera.net/reprints>

Permissions: <http://www.aera.net/permissions>

## **Adoption and Adaptation: School District Responses to State Imposed Learning and Graduation Requirements**

**John W. Sipple**  
*Cornell University*

**Kieran Killeen**  
*University of Vermont*

**David H. Monk**  
*Pennsylvania State University*

*Keywords: policy implementation, school district organization, standards-based reform*

COINCIDING with the national trend to improve public education through the establishment of state curriculum and assessment standards, New York State has embarked upon an ambitious effort to raise high school graduation requirements for all students. Prior to June of 2000, fewer than one of every two students in the state earned a state-endorsed college preparatory diploma (i.e., Regents Diploma). As of June of 2000, the state board of education (Board of Regents) began phasing in a series of college preparatory courses and exams to be required of every student as a condition of high school graduation. The state will complete the phasing in of the new standards in June of 2005 including the required passage of five end-of-course-exams.<sup>1</sup> Hence, graduation from high school in New York State (NYS) is becoming increasingly contingent upon being able to pass a series of courses and examinations that historically have been taken primarily by the college-bound student population. Researchers have recently begun analyzing the implementation of the new state standards in NYS (Bishop & Mane, 2001; DeBray, Parson, & Woodworth, 2001; Grant, 2000a, 2000b; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Monk, Sipple, & Killeen, 2001) and have examined (a) compliance on the part of New York school districts as the new policy began to be

implemented and (b) consequences for students, teachers, administrators, parents, and taxpayers. More specifically, recent research has revealed evidence of steady progress toward compliance, a surprising level of variation in response (Sipple & Killeen, 2004), and some early evidence of student distress (Monk & Hussain, 1998). In this study, we build on these efforts with an investigation of organizational responses (aggregate and individual) of school districts to this very significant change in NYS education policy.

While the focus of this analysis is exclusively on state policy changes and school district response in NYS, the issues involved are all but universal across the United States. Nearly all states are now using or creating some version of statewide curriculum and assessment standards, though the comprehensiveness and rigor vary by state (Meyer, Orlofsky, Skinner, & Spicer, 2002; Skinner & Stareshina, 2004). Many states have generated statewide model curricula and some states have linked the curricula to their assessments. This is the case in NY, where for more than 100 years, state-generated end-of-course exams have been tightly aligned with the curriculum taught in the courses. So while the practice of aligning curricula and exams in NY is not new, the mandate that every student in the state

must pass the exams in order to graduate from high school is unprecedented. Another key aspect of these state policies involve the removal, or de-institutionalization, of the NYS basic skills examinations in favor of this more rigorous set of state examinations for graduation. As a result of these changes, the annual Education Week *Quality Counts* report ranks the standards and accountability system in New York State second among all states (Skinner & Staesina, 2004). The full impact of this standards movement across the country is as yet unknown, though NY State provides a rich test case for examining the potential impact of such high standards for all students.

Of particular import to this study is the analysis of the heightened graduation standards in New York State on district and school practice, the organizational and scheduling changes necessary to move all students into the college-preparatory courses, and the alternative outcomes that may serve as a pressure release on the system. In shedding light on the experience in NY State, we hope to offer insights to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as to how local educators are responding to such changes and impositions of state education policy.

Conceptually, we aim to contribute to the longstanding theoretical and policy debate as to whether state activism has a relatively strong or weak impact on local educational practice (Malen, 2003). Much empirical and theoretical work describes the processes by which school officials buffer teachers from state policy and how districts co-opt the externally imposed directives. This results in a dilution of the state policies rendering them weak or ineffectual (e.g., Firestone, 1989; Firestone, Mayrowez, & Fairman, 1998; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Selznick, 1949). Alternatively, states often claim that they are simply setting the standard towards which schools must strive, and claim to devolve much power and authority to the localities in deciding how programatically and organizationally to achieve the state-determined goals. In setting standards and holding localities accountable through state-imposed examinations, it is argued that the states are having a deep impact on local school practice by setting the agenda and narrowing local programmatic choices and outcomes (e.g., Firestone et al., 1998; Malen, 2003). Moreover, researchers have emphasized the variance in response and perception of the new standards within districts (Spillane, 1998) and among teachers (Grant, 2000b).

This article presents insights into the variety of early, local-level responses to heightened and state-led standards reform. Prefacing the main findings from our case analysis in five school districts (2000–2001), we offer a portrait of statewide school district performance in the eight year period leading up to implementation of the new standards (1992–2000). These basic trend analyses document the main goal of the standards (i.e., moving more students into the Regents program and earning state-endorsed diplomas) and the major concerns of increasing numbers of students dropping out of the educational system when faced with such high standards. These two measures of school and district performance or outcomes formed the main source of pressure facing educators in the early period of reform. What is more fully elaborated in the article's qualitative findings is the local dialog between outcome based pressures and organizational responses during the 2000–2001 academic year. These findings provide insight into the "fine-grained answers to key questions about the impact of state education initiatives on local schools" (Malen, 2003, p. 210). Our qualitative work incorporates interview data from five school districts and provides a window into the local strategies, mechanisms, and conflicts behind the broader trend lines.

It is particularly timely to examine the early phase New York State's efforts to raise high school graduation requirements.<sup>2</sup> These findings illuminate a period of standards-based reform where a great deal of attention is focused high school graduation requirements and participation on comprehensive examinations. Despite the heightened attention on high school course taking and graduation, our research program and data collection also includes elementary and middle-grade educators. This is an attempt to capture the systemic nature of the district response to the new graduation requirements.

## Literature Review

The imposition of rigorous state-imposed learning and graduation standards on every student in New York State offers an important opportunity to witness the impact of state policy change on schools, organizational activity among highly institutionalized organizations, and the consequences of the heightened state standards. We now briefly review several lines of research related to these important empirical and conceptual issues.

Constituting remarkably similar organization and practice across time and place, schools are social organizations steeped in strong norms, scripted practices, and unwritten rules that have long been documented and discussed (Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1975; Metz, 1990; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Tyack & Tobin, 1993). The effect of these deeply embedded practices and beliefs has been to make schools resistant to change and external imposition. As argued by some researchers, the impact of such resistance has been to diminish or obfuscate centralized (i.e., state or federal) attempts alter school practice. The recent trend of state activism surrounding standards and accountability systems motivates a salient question: How are changes in state education policy impacting public schools?

Malen (2003) summarizes and contrasts two general interpretations of state activism on local school practice. The *low impact* interpretation reflects the view that state policy activity can be deflected, co-opted, or ignored by local educators and communities. This low impact perspective is theoretically rooted in the school-organization-decoupled-from-instructional-practice metaphor advanced by Weick (1976) and Meyer and Rowan (1977, 1978). The metaphor is used to explain how a school's survival is more dependent on mirroring prescribed organizational forms than improving technical (e.g., instructional) practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In Weick's (1976) terms, school district leaders can often meet state mandates by decoupling school and district organization attributes from classroom practice thus allowing teachers to continue to teach unimpeded by external requirements. DeBray, Parson & Woodward (2001, p. 189) term this "compliance without capacity," though suggest it is most descriptive of the response of low-performing schools. Institutional theorists suggest that school districts and external agents also establish logics of confidence by which both sides agree to inspect only symbolic representations of technical practice, rather than the technical practice itself (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer & Rowan, 1978). Thus by altering structural and reporting arrangements that signal compliance to state regulation, local school and district leaders may buffer actual classroom activity from any requisite instructional change or assessment.

This work, however, implied that local organizational leaders were "passive pawns" in the broader social system. More recent work high-

lights the agency of local actors (DiMaggio, 1988) and describes the variety of strategic options available to and used by organizational leaders to respond to external pressures (Oliver, 1991). Such strategic responses range from complete acquiescence to external demands to active cooptation of the policy. The response of the organizational leadership is dependent on the interests of the organization and its dependencies on external agents for support (Oliver, 1991; Sipple, 1999). In sum, current thinking is that local school leaders are not only aware of external pressures but act strategically to balance local and non-local demands.

Arguing that this weak policy impact interpretation may be overstated, Malen (2003, p. 202) concludes:

The low impact view may place too much emphasis on the capacity of local schools to duck and dodge state directives and too little emphasis on the degree to which the state may be able to cultivate multiple avenues of influence that engender consequential effects on numerous facets of local schools.

Conversely, the *high impact* interpretation of state and federal activism stems from the commonly argued strategy that state officials set the target toward which schools and students must strive, though leave unspecified the strategies to achieve the results. This deregulation allows and encourages local agency, decision-making, and innovation as long as the district meets the goals and indicators set by the state (e.g., graduation rates). Malen (2003, p. 202), suggests "that the state may be influencing schools in multiple ways that, when taken together, restrict local autonomy and redefine the purposes and practices of schools."

Work by several researchers (e.g., Fairman & Firestone, 2001; Firestone et al., 1998; Goertz, 2001; Grant, 2000a; Knapp, Bamberg, Ferguson, & Hill, 1998) offer insight into the ways by which changes in state policy narrow the range of organizational and curricular options and practices for local schools and teachers. For instance, Fairman and Firestone (2001) argue that state standards can influence districts to focus on certain aspects of content and pedagogy, but only in an environment supported by appropriate teacher staff development, district size, and governance arrangements. Moreover, when districts do follow state standards, the standards are far more likely to influence course content than actual pedagogy.

Thus the context of state mandated pressure is a true blend of powerful messages, performance targets, and vague regulation devolving decision making to local school officials. This may be a novel blend that may challenge traditional school organization, culture, performance, and purposes, thus constraining the range of responses by narrowing the scope of the purpose of public schools.

As the push for greater state standards proceeds, school districts also face regulatory pressures in the form of sanctions (social and fiscal) if they do not meet the new state mandates. Thus, the new state-led reform movement in New York may move district response beyond traditional logics of confidence and symbolic activity toward actual inspection of the technical practice of schools. This change may serve to threaten the traditional stability enjoyed by organizations that had long been able to buffer their technical core from changes in state policy. In other words, fewer districts may now operate in strong institutional though weak technical environments (Cibulka, 1995, 1996; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1983). The environment of schools seems to be shifting toward strong institutional *and* strong technical pressures. Some argue that this current reform effort will finally change the technical core of schools (i.e., classroom instruction) rather than just result in superficial changes in organizational structure (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996; Rowan & Miskel, 1999).

With clear policy mandates and strong regulatory sticks from state agencies, school administrators may choose to wholly accept those mandates in ways that foster inter-district coherence within states (Goertz, 2001; Goertz & Duffy, 2001). Similarly, it has been documented how upper level administrators typically respond to institutional pressures in symbolic ways while teachers are more substantive in their responses (Ogawa, Sandholtz, Martinez-Flores, & Scribner, 2003). If superintendents are responding to the same state-wide pressures and expectations, they may do so in ways that are similar. Such uniform policy adoption among districts and schools can be interpreted as a positive sign of reform (Cuban, 1998), though there are reasons to give pause. Given that districts, and schools within them, are highly stratified by poverty, race, and teacher quality (e.g., Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff 2002), policy prescriptions may do a poor job of aligning programmatic strategies with students who

are most in need. In other words, state policies that result in uniform response may not necessarily be stimulating effective response.

As standards-based reforms have linked school outcomes (e.g., tests performance, graduation and dropout rates) to school curricula and teaching, researchers have studied the variety of ways state policy reform invokes changes among districts, schools, and teachers (Fuhrman, 2001; Fuhrman & O'Day, 1996; Fuhrman, 1993; Malen, 2003; Ogawa, Sandholtz, Martinez-Flores, & Scribner, 2003). Studies generally suggest that instructional content continues to be aligned with state curricular standards, but that what is taught is reduced to what is being tested. In this sense, state assessments frame the "important curriculum" for teachers, but do not appear to alter teachers' assumptions about student learning and pedagogy (e.g., Cimbricz, 2002; Cohen & Hill, 2000; Knapp et al., 1998; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999). Among NYS teachers during this early period of reform, Grant (2000) cites evidence of confusion over state mandates that direct the alignment of standards and curriculum, and specifically over professional development activities designed to improve their practice. This finding is consistent with what Cuban (1998) calls the adaptiveness and longevity standards by which practitioners judge the importance of standards-based reform. Teachers, Cuban argues, value the elements of reform that focus on their ability to be inventive and to modify policy mandates into productive outcomes. The degree to which those innovations hold over time are also important.

An important accountability measure of new graduation standards is the rate at which school districts graduate students. Of course, as graduation rates become more important, so do measures of alternative outcomes. The discernable alternatives to high school graduation are dropping out of school and/or enrolling or transferring into a GED program. National trends of GED participation and completion reflect a steady increase in the number of people participating in GED programming, especially in the last five years (e.g., in 1971 227,000 GED credentials; in 1996 488,000 credentials; in 2001 648,000 credentials). Furthermore, the proportion of all GED credentials issued to individuals 19 years old or younger has risen from 35% in 1974 to 41% in 2001 (NCES, 2002) signaling a greater intensity of GED participation among high school age individuals.



While the economic data on school dropouts is clear, with high school dropouts earning significantly less than high school completers, the impact school leavers earning a GED on individuals is more complicated (Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1998; Tyler, 2003). Given the advent of high-stakes testing, there is much debate and empirical study surrounding two issues related to the GED: The *prevalence* and *benefit* of GED participation. There appears to be preliminary and limited evidence that GED participation is increasing in response to, or at least in concert with, heightened state standards (e.g., Chaplin, 1999; Haney, 2000). Moreover, Tyler (2003) argues that there is a growing body of evidence that GED availability may increase the rate at which students leave high school before graduating (e.g., reduce graduation rates). Possession of GED certification, however, seems to result in muted labor market advantages. These positive effects of GED certification seem to accrue only to the lowest skill students and after a period of years after completion (Tyler, 2003). Jacob (2001), in his analysis of the impact of high school graduation exams on student achievement and dropout rates, contradicts previous research that documented improved learning outcomes resulting from heightened state standards. Jacob concludes that graduation exams have no measurable effect on most students' learning, though have deleterious effects on the lowest quintile of students. Whether the increase in GED participation is a result of the push for high stakes assessments or is a reflection of the labor market unrelated to state education standards, micro-level analyses and insights into these changes are sparse and warrant attention to flesh out the broader quantitative trends.

Noticeably absent from a discussion of organizational dynamics and state mandated reform is a literature about both the mechanisms and sources of pressure that carry state mandated policy reforms forward. Obviously the state is a large player, however intermediary actors are rarely discussed in the literature (Cunningham, 2003). We know little about the importance of regional education agencies, media influence, local school boards, and professional associations in interpreting external mandates for local education administrators and teachers. Addressing the question of what constitutes the community surrounding a local school districts, Arum (2000) and Sipple (2004) review and examine two definitions of a

school's environment. Is it a school district's local ecological community (e.g., wealth, size, politics) that shapes and constrains practice or is it a much broader institutional-level community that is more salient?

Our study addresses the myriad forces and decisions facing administrators and teachers as increasing numbers of students are required to participate and perform on state-determined outcomes. The interaction of local expectations and capacities with state expectations and inducements is of great interest. In economic terms, this period is intriguing as state-led reforms have arguably introduced distinct incentives for educators and students to participate and perform on outcome based exams. However, consistent with prior research on school organizational change, the behavior of local educators and students will be responsive to specific external incentives, as well as the deeply embedded norms and contexts of local school communities. Given these foci, we investigate how districts are complying with state-led reforms and local constraints and interests, with particular attention to programmatic and structural changes arguably related to the new high school graduation requirements.

### Data and Methods

We draw on two main sources of data for this study. The main data set is derived from interviews and document analysis in five school districts (K–12) collected during the 2000–2001 academic year. To set the context for the qualitative analysis and place the local activity in a timely perspective, we offer descriptive trend analyses using the universe of school districts between the 1991/1992 and 1999/2000 academic years.

#### *Descriptive Trend Analyses*

In this study, we are interested in tracking statewide adherence to the Regents testing program and the relationships between participation and performance outcomes during a time of great change in NY State high school graduation requirements. Information about the Regents testing program comes from the New York State School Report Card Data File.<sup>3</sup> The school district attribute data come from the School Financial Master File and the Institutional Master File.<sup>4</sup> For this data, we target the period between 1991–92 and 1999–2000 to capture the years leading up to the highly publicized implementation of the new standards and focus on participation in and

performance on the English Regents examination. We chose this exam because it was the first exam students were required to pass in order to graduate in June of 2000. We report on analyses of additional examinations in other subject areas elsewhere (Monk, Sipple, & Killeen, 2001), though the basic trends are similar. We focus on district averages for the “regular” K–12 school districts in the State (more than 90% of these school districts have only one high school), and we make comparisons with the “Big 5” city districts (the average of the four to 12 high schools in these districts). In the last section we briefly comment on the participation and performance of special education students in the Regents testing program, as nearly all special education students are required by the new state policy to participate in the testing program.

For the examination data, we calculate a participation rate and several performance indicators though do not offer significance tests given that we are using the universe of school districts with high schools in the State of New York. The participation rate is defined as the number of students taking an exam divided by the average grade enrollment of the school (AGE).<sup>5</sup> Prior to 1996, the state education department did not track the participation and performance of student class cohorts on the Regents exams. Therefore, in instances where students from several grades participate in a Regents exam, we are unable to separate the results by grade. We rely on the AGE to smooth over these exceptions.

We utilized two specific test performance indicators: passing rates of test takers and passing rates of student cohorts. The state board of education provided for a transition period wherein passing rates for the examinations were lowered to 55% during the early years of implementation. For this reason, we refrain from using the term “passing rates,” since there can be variation in what the passing rate is depending on the year and the exam. We rely instead on the count of students achieving a score of 65% or higher. We also rely on other performance outcomes, including the dropout rate and district spending per pupil. Dropout data are derived from the mandated school report card files.<sup>6</sup> The dropout rate is the ratio of the number of students reported as dropping out in a school year, divided by the number of students enrolled in grades 9–12 in the fall of that school-year.

Again, we present these trend data not as definitive analyses, but rather to establish a broad context in which local educators are operating as the new standards are implemented.

### *Qualitative Case Methods*

We employ an embedded case study design (Yin, 1994). The organizational responses of school districts to standards-based reforms constitute the “case” of our study. The case, then, is the collective and cumulative responses of a set of school district organizations to the new state policies and requirements. The organizational response is conceived as the observed changes in district and school organization, program, and expectations as a response to environmental and institutional pressures (e.g., regulation, professional norms, and underlying belief systems) related to standards-based reform. The school district organization represents the primary unit of analysis for this study. Secondary units of analyses are critical leaders in school district governance, such as superintendents, deputy superintendents, finance officers, principal(s), department chairs, teacher union representatives, teachers and Board of Education presidents.

The case study sampling method follows principles of criterion and stratification sampling (Patton, 2002), where school district sites of above average and below average criteria were selected for study. We set a target of six school districts for this analysis. The purpose of this approach was not to gain statistical representativeness or generalizability, but rather to explore a variety of major issues of organizational response across different types of districts.

We used the following purposeful sampling criterion to select the participating districts: The database of non-Big Five school districts was parsed to those districts that displayed “average” test participation rates on the English exam over a two-year average of 1992 and 1993. “Average” participation denotes school districts within one standard deviation of the statewide mean, or between 51.9 and 69.7. A total of 270 districts were identified. Districts were then categorized based on changes in both test participation and performance between two averaged time periods, 1992/1993 and 1998/1999, and labeled as follows: Movers—Districts with changes in participation rates greater than 30%; Stayers—Districts with changes in participation rates less than 15%;

Hot—Districts that outperformed the state average for performance gains (greater than a  $-8.5$  change between 1998/1999 and 1992/1993); Cold—Districts that performed lower than the state average for performance gains (less than a  $-8.5$  between 1998/1999 and 1992/1993). This approach attempts to avoid the identification of outlier sites, while focusing on districts experiencing moderate changes instead.

Six districts were then randomly selected from these four categories. Given our interest in more successful districts, we selected four Hot districts and two Cold districts. Two districts are “Hot-Movers” (Districts K & G); two are “Hot-Stayers” (Districts L & R). One district was selected from “Cold Movers” (District M) and one from “Cold Stayers” (District N). This “purposeful” sampling is based on the idea that performance outcomes (e.g., participation and test-passing rates) are related to structural and programmatic differences. By intentionally seeking districts with orthogonal test participation and performance levels, we hypothesized that we would be more likely to observe stronger variations in program, structure, and community change issues. Readers should note that we selected sites from among non-Big Five school districts, thus avoiding the large urban centers, in order to seek findings from typical district contexts but also due to our lack of capacity to adequately analyze such large districts with 30,000+ students. As will be discussed in later sections, the site districts approximate geographic and demographic characteristics of the majority of NYS school districts.

Letters were then sent to superintendents in the Fall of 2000 with information about the scope and purposes of the study, the demands on the district, and a request that the district be allowed to participate in the study. All Six districts agreed to participate. District G, however, proved to be problematic. We conducted an initial two-hour interview with the superintendent, but were unable to schedule subsequent visits. We eventually dropped this district from the analysis leaving us with five districts in the study.

We selected the interview participants from a list of position titles and included the superintendent, assistant superintendents for curriculum, personnel, the business official, teachers’ union president, elementary, middle, and high school principals, English and mathematics department chairs or curriculum coordinators and teachers.

During the initial interviews, respondents suggested additional names and positions. Using this snowball sampling approach, we subsequently interviewed many of these additional educators and community leaders deemed relevant to the study. On site, the research team<sup>7</sup> interviewed most participants individually, though small groups of teachers, administrators, PTA leaders, or Board members were interviewed collectively when necessary. Interviews ranged in length from 20 to 120 minutes, with the average length being approximately 40 minutes. In total, we conducted 95 interviews with 133 individuals from five school districts.

Given the number of researchers (7–9 per visit) and our desire to be consistent across respondents and districts, we used a set of semi-structured interview protocols to guide the interviews (see Appendix). Each of the field researchers utilized several questions and probes designed prior to the interview. The intent here was to limit interviewer effects, improve topic coverage during the interviews, and increase the transparency of the overall study for the participants (Patton, 2002). The protocol design also included opportunities for participants to share concerns and ideas not directly targeted in the protocol. This balanced use of open-ended questions allowed for more naturalistic inquiry and response among our participants.

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the research team using QSR’s N-Vivo software package. The coding of data was guided by the extant empirical and theoretical literature and, for example, emphasized the variety of agents influencing programmatic decisions and the justifications given for why programmatic decisions were made. When possible, we triangulated claims between multiple interviews and district documents. Finally, we sought increased credibility for our findings by submitting drafts of the individual cases to superintendents for their review and comment. After reviewing their case report, the educators did not request any major changes, though they did add some minor clarifications. This form of member checking (Mertens, 1998) served to confirm our findings and interpretations.

However, these methods introduce limitations in our study in three distinct ways. By extending our list of interviewees to those recommended by typical leaders in school districts we may systematically miss marginalized personnel, or those



perceived as incompetent by the leaders. Second, our use of member checking was limited to the distribution of case reports to the central district leader (the Superintendent). This step, adopted out of time-constraint, assumes that the views of the superintendent are aligned with principals and teachers. Third, our structured interview protocols may systematically fail to identify other rich contexts that influence important organizational processes. On some level, systematic questioning limits the opportunity for discovery through less constrained interview designs.

Finally, this narrative approach was selected given the sequence of our ongoing research. Our purpose here was to develop a narrative that informs the future collection of data by which we can formally test the relationship between stated organizational changes and contextual variables from each school district. These latter methods will likely employ formal variance and process approaches in the study of organizational change (See Poole et al, 2000), that are premature given type and scope of our case study data. Moreover, we believe that the scope of standards based reform is so comprehensive that traditional models of change processes may be overly reliant on easily identifiable variables and thus analytic findings may miss the richness of school responses to reforms. In short, it is a bit early to formally test the manner by which schools and districts may be changing given the dearth of information about the nature and focus of decision-making inside districts.

## Findings

We set out to document and analyze the responses of school districts (aggregate and individual) to a significant change in NYS education policy, namely the ratcheting up of graduation requirements for traditionally non-college bound students. In doing so we aim to contribute to the longstanding theoretical and policy debates as to whether state activism has a relatively strong or weak impact on local educational practice with a particular focus on the early stages of reform. In order to document the social, structural, and programmatic changes individual districts are making, we first present descriptive findings using statewide school district data and follow with more extensive reporting of our qualitative findings. In the concluding discussion section, we tie the two sets of findings together and link them back to the

extant literature on the organizational responses to state reform.

### *Adopting Policies and Adaptive Change*

The primary story in New York State in the late 1990s is related to the heightened learning and graduation standards for all students. This first involves the dramatic increase in students participating in college preparatory courses and end of grade exams. The second story involves how well children are performing. While the official beginning of the implementation of the new state graduation standards began in June of 2000 (with all students needing to pass the English exam in order to graduate), the Board of Regents laid the groundwork in the early 1990s. The formal decision was made in 1996, with a timetable initiated in 1997. Full implementation is expected by 2005 (2004–2005 school year).

Figure 1 shows change over the decade in the percentage of students taking the English Regents exam in the regular K–12 school districts, the Big 4 city districts, and in New York City. The chart shows quite clearly that participation rates increased in all settings over this period. The regular K–12 districts (with one high school per district) moved from an average participation rate of 60.4 percent for the school year 1991–1992 to 91.4% for the school year 1999–2000. Participation rates among high schools in the big cities are also increasing, but the rates are historically lower than the regular K–12 districts. In particular, the Big 4 districts move from an average of 49% in 1995–1996 to 82.5% in 1999–2000. Participation rates for the NYC high schools are between those from the Big Four and the regular K–12 districts.

Interestingly, there is a reduction in the gap between city schools and regular K–12 districts. For example, between 1996 and 2000 the range between the Big Four and the regular K–12 districts fell from 22 to 8.9 percentage points. It is important to understand that variation exists around these averages ( $M = 91\%$ ,  $SD = 14.96\%$ ) and that schools and districts continue to vary with respect to the level of participation in the Regents testing program. This variation is decreasing as evidenced by a decrease in the coefficient of variation as the decade proceeded (see Table 1). Why variation persists, given the very clear state policy directive, is addressed below in the qualitative findings.

In terms of performance among the regular K–12 districts, the percentage of takers with scores

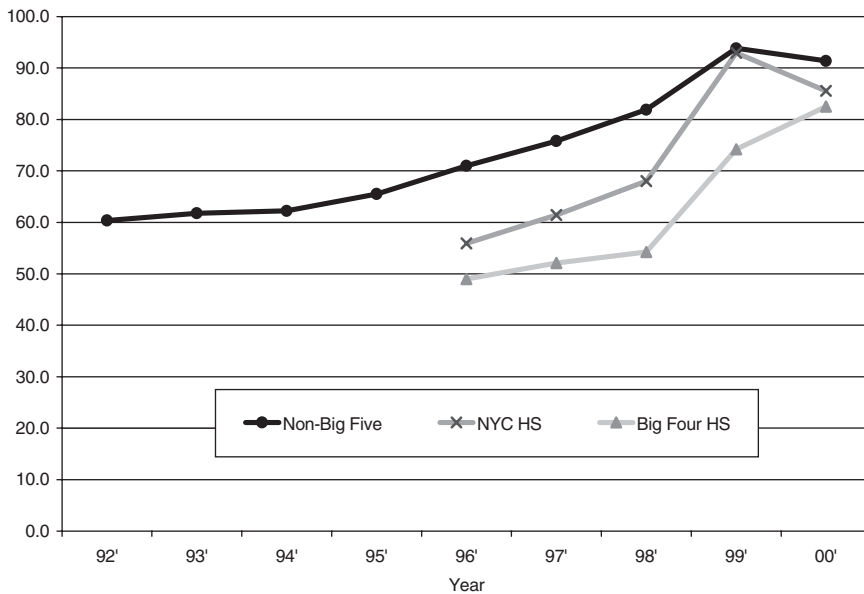


FIGURE 1. *Regents English participation rates (%), 1992–2000.*

of 65% or higher drops from 91% in 1992 to 81% in 2000 (See Figure 2). This decline is consistent with the argument that students facing the greatest deficits in terms of their ability to perform on the exam are the last students to enter the testing program. The results for the city schools are starker. The percentage of students scoring above 65% is lowest for the New York City high schools. The schools in the Big 4 cities reveal more substantial declines over the period with most of the decline occurring between 1998 and 2000.

The public reporting of high school performance measures, in this early period of reform, carries a great deal of weight in local communities. Thus, the declines in school performance on Regents examinations are likely the source of some tension across many districts as well as the

motivation for new structural arrangements and instructional innovations. Despite explanations of cohort effects, year-to-year changes in performance do capture the public's attention in local settings. The nature of these changes, as we will see, is quite complex. For example, this policy reform period involves issues such as the partial inclusion of children with special needs in Regents examinations, new mandated remediation programs, as well as new incentives for districts to manipulate performance outcomes through their involvement with dropout prevention programs.

In fact, at the outset of the 1999–2000 school year, there appeared to be very little evidence statewide that the increased student participation in Regent's programs was fueling remarkable changes in district dropout rates or spending

TABLE 1  
*Coefficient of Variation in English Regents Test Participation, Selected Years*

	School District	Large City School	
	Regular K–12	NYC	Big Four
1995–96	26.9	51.2	54.2
1997–98	24.8	44.6	53.6
1998–00	16.4	32.3	41.7

*Note.* The coefficient of variation is calculated as the standard deviation divided by the mean, multiplied by 100. The smaller the coefficient the more equitable (less variation) the exam participation.

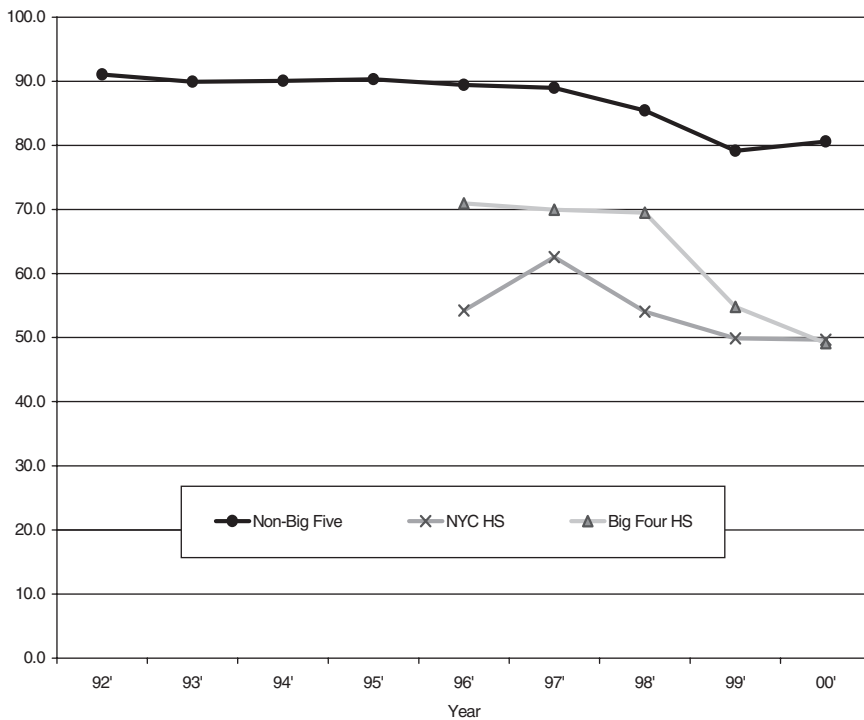


FIGURE 2. *Regents English performance (% of tested passing at 65%), 1992–2000.*

levels. Specifically there is no meaningful, bivariate relationship between a change in participation and a change in the dropout rate during the 1995–1997 and 1997–1999 study periods. The zero-order correlations ranged between  $-.02$  and  $+.01$  ( $p > .05$ ). Consistent with this finding are the officially reported dropout rates across the state. Moreover, the percent of Regents diplomas from 1997–2002 signals a steady increase in the proportion of students earning a Regents diploma.

#### *Case Description and Analysis*

In this portion of the study, we embed analyses of five school districts within the broader “case” of the implementation of the new learning and graduation standards in New York State. We do this to provide new and useful information to state policymakers, educators, and researchers who are trying to improve student learning across the state and better understand the implementation of new state policies. In doing so, we investigate and report on the way public-school districts respond to state-led standards-based reform. In addition, we attempt to identify other supporting and competing pressures that shape school and district responses to the new state standards.

As an organizing theme it appears that community demands and available resources are better correlates of significant programmatic change than when districts actually began to implement their changes. We began this study by identifying four categories of districts (e.g. “Hot/Movers”, “Cold/Stayers”) believing that the four categories would reveal underlying structural and programmatic distinctions at the site level. Yet these distinctions between “hot” and “cold” districts became relatively unimportant and, at times, misleading. The more relevant of the two continuums is whether or not a district was a “Stayer” or “Mover”; this continuum is pegged to student participation on the English Regents exam. We found a “Mover” who was just beginning to alter its academic program to reflect the new standards (District M) and a “Stayer” that had been engaged in major reform efforts for five years (District N). In other words, just because districts moved more students into the Regents program did not mean those districts made significant changes to their academic programs.

With this initial understanding, the qualitative findings lead with an introduction of the study sites and follow with a more structured presenta-

tion of the organizational responses to reform pressures. Table 2 offers snapshot of the district characteristics and is followed by summary text.

District K is a small, homogenous suburban school district, though has many characteristics of a rural community. Two elementary schools and one combined middle/high school service the district’s 1200 students. Important to report are the statements by District K educators and residents that the Combined Wealth Ratio (CWR) is skewed by the presence of a few “billionaires” who reside in their community. New York State classifies this district a low need suburban district.

District L is a suburban, middle class district in the heart of central New York State. Community elementary schools provide primary level instruction with students then attending two intermediate schools. One high school services the entire community. District L is considered to be an average need suburban district by the State Education Department.

District M is an urban district located in upstate New York. Many of the district’s demographic indicators reflect the changing face of a once-thriving city. District M recently experienced the loss of its major economic engine resulting in an outmigration of middle class families and in-migration of greater numbers of poor and minority families. The number of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch has doubled in the last decade. This district has been labeled as a high need urban district by the New York Sate Education Department.

District N is a suburban district located in a densely populated, blue collar area of upstate New York State. The district is configured with

two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. The State classifies this district as an “average need suburban” district.

District R spans an expansive geographic area encompassing several distinct rural communities. Not surprisingly, this district’s student population comprises a mix of both rural and suburban constituents representing an array of socioeconomic backgrounds. Five distinct elementary schools, each representing one of the districts’ component communities, feed into one recently-built middle school. From there, students attend one centralized high school. Unanticipated difficulties with scheduling interviews limited the amount of data collected in this district.

Perceptions and Beliefs

In order to place learning and graduation standards into the broader context of public education in the spring of 2001 (the first year of the phase in of the new standards) we set out to identify the major issues faced by the educators in each district. In other words, where are the new standards on the radar screen of local educators? Is it the sole issue that must be addressed, or is it just one of many pressing issues faced by local educators and their community? After interviewing over 133 educators and community leaders in 95 interviews<sup>8</sup> in five different communities, we were struck by the impact the Board of Regent’s decision to require all students to earn a Regents diploma had on each district. This decision, coupled with the new elementary and middle school testing program, has, at the very least, captured the attention of educators across the state and has generated much activity, discussion, and debate.

TABLE 2  
Descriptive Overview of Case Study Sites

District	K	L	M	N	R
Urbanicity	Suburban/ Rural	Suburban	Small City/ Urban	Urban/ Suburban	Rural/ Suburban
Enrollment	1200	6000	5000	3200	5800
CWR (mean index = 1)	2.0	0.8	0.5	0.9	0.5
FRPL	10%	10%	45%	15%	25%
% Minority	5%	2%	11%	4%	1%
% Regents diplomas	62%	68%	55%	58%	39%
Sampling matrix	Hot Mover	Hot Stayer	Cold Mover	Cold Stayer	Cold Mover
Persons interviewed	17	27	29	26	11

Note. All quantitative data has been rounded to conceal the identity of individual districts. Data Source: New York State School Report Card Datafile, 2001 (2000–2001 School Year).

TABLE 3  
*Number of Coded References of Major Issues by District*

District	K	L	M	N	R	Total
Standards/Testing/Curriculum	8	20	12	18	9	67
Fiscal	6	10	10	0	3	29
Changing demographics	3	5	12	1	5	26
Special education	4	2	3	1	1	11
Facilities	6	1	2	0	0	9
Safety net	2	2	2	0	0	6
Violence	0	1	1	1	0	3
Total	29	41	42	21	18	151

When asked what is the most important issue facing their district today and in the coming years, educators and community leaders referred to the state standards, assessments, and curriculum more than any other response (44% of all coded responses<sup>9</sup>). The state standards were mentioned about twice as often as the next most prevalent responses including fiscal issues (19%) and the changing demographics of students in their community (17%). Special education, school facilities, the Regents “safety net,” and school violence were mentioned less frequently, as shown in Tables 3 and 4.

These aggregate responses across the five districts conceal important interdistrict differences. District N stands out as there was near uniformity among all staff members of the significance of the state standards. This should not be construed that all participants in District N are in agreement or disagreement with the standards, but simply that the standards are the “most important issue facing the district.” This is a district that began implementing an “all-Regents” program as early as 1994 and had a superintendent who aggressively led the district toward an all-Regents curriculum. Standards appear newer in Districts L,

M, and R. As such, the concerns with standards in District N are pervasive throughout the ranks of administrators and teachers, and are not considered a passing fad.

The one district where the standards were not the most prevalent response is District M. This community recently underwent major economic and social changes. By no means did this diminish the importance of standards within the district (we found much evidence that the standards are driving significant change within the district), but it does signal the relative position of standards in light of local community events and demands. We also found that respondents viewed the issues not as disconnected entities, but rather as an interconnected web of related issues. In other words, state mandates were implemented with regard to other local fiscal and school-level programmatic issues.

*All Children Can Learn.* The new learning and graduation standards, no doubt, have pressed all educators to address the question, “Can all children learn at high levels?” We found strong evidence that agreement or disagreement with the statement varies little across the five districts, but varies greatly between the central office, school

TABLE 4  
*Percent of Coded References of Major Issues by District*

District	K	L	M	N	R	Total
Standards/Testing/Curriculum	28	49	29	86	50	44
Fiscal	21	24	24	0	17	19
Changing demographics	10	12	29	5	28	17
Special education	14	5	7	5	6	7
Facilities	21	2	5	0	0	6
Safety net	7	5	5	0	0	4
Violence	0	2	2	5	0	2



buildings and community. Superintendents are most likely to agree with the statement, whereas principals and teachers are less likely to do so. We found evidence of this distinction in every district.

Among superintendents and central office staff, the belief that all children can succeed is pervasive in four of the five districts. District R's superintendent is confident that "among all the school community, the Board of Education, superintendent, teachers, support staff, everyone, administrators, the whole thing . . . every student can achieve." Indeed, a recurrent belief amongst central office leaders in District N is that high expectations are necessary and beneficial, that the new state mandates will prove instrumental in shifting the responsibility of student achievement towards educators, and will challenge low community expectations and teachers' explanatory, or excusatory, models of student underachievement. One central office representative from District L went so far as to state that educators "don't have a right to set a target at any less than (all students) being successful."

Building administrators were somewhat less convinced, though we documented a range of responses. Many principals seemed to reflect the attitudes and convictions of their superintendents. Though the concern was voiced that not all students will graduate with Regents diplomas in District N (whose superintendent was unwavering in her push for an all-Regents program), building administrators seemed to understand that the expectation is that if a student is not successful, the district/school/teacher must intervene to help. In other words, the reforms seem to have unified the sense of who is accountable for student success. Additionally, building administrators in District N reported that the common standards would assist those most at risk of failure. Conversely, in District M, where the superintendent questioned whether all children could pass the gate-keeper mathematics exam, a building principal stated: "A lot of these kids . . . just can't meet these standards. There's no way they're going to meet them and some of the kids do get frustrated and they end up dropping out of school."

Of all the respondents with whom we spoke, teachers and community leaders were the least convinced that all students could succeed with the new standards. They often shared mixed views of the standards. For example, despite the strong

convictions of central office and building leadership in District N, teachers tended to focus on several factors that might prevent all students from passing the Regents examinations. These factors concern the interaction between student learning styles, abilities, and demographics and the new learning requirements. There is a belief among some teachers that the examinations encourage and reward only a limited set of learning styles and that some students simply learn differently than that which is required to do well on the exams. There is also strong sentiment among some teachers (as well as some administrators and community leaders) that some children simply do not have the raw abilities to succeed at the newly established levels of English and Math. The concern over demographics seems to be a blending of the previous two issues (learning styles and abilities), though it also includes an apparent lack of parental support for many children.

In District R, there was much sentiment that student background and lack of resources will make it very difficult to attain the higher standards: "I sincerely believe that there are some kids that are just plain not capable of doing certain things and we're trying to fit a square peg into a round hole." Educators in Districts K, M, and R also shared consistent statements and beliefs about their concerns as to the feasibility of all children graduating with a Regents diploma. Specifically, in District K, three teachers agreed with the statement made by one teacher that ". . . it'd be great if they all passed, but in a real world you know every kid can't pass every exam; it's not going to happen." Even so, all but one teacher referred to efforts made with all students to ensure their successful performance on exams.

By and large, community leaders<sup>10</sup> with whom we met questioned the need and value of having all students earn a Regents diploma. Several community leaders in District L agreed that there is still a great need for plumbers and electricians and that the new standards were unnecessary for such professions. One community leader in District R noted: "I think that [parents] feel honestly that [the standards] are not attainable by many, that there are so many students here that it's just not a reality, that they'll never be able to achieve that level." A community representative in District M qualified her belief in whether all children can make it: "Probably true as long as you provide enough resources and enough time."

### *Pressure: Sources and Consequences*

We initially designed our data collection, in part, to identify the sources of influence on the educators in the participating districts. For example, we were interested in the sources of educational ideas for at-risk and special education students and how such ideas were introduced to the school district (e.g., memos, conferences). While we did identify a small set of agents from which some ideas and support came (e.g., NY State Education Department, BOCES [Board Of Cooperative Educational Services; i.e., intermediate school districts], State Council of Superintendents), the amorphous sense of pressure reported by a majority of the respondents is most salient. Observers may interpret the specific responses to the pressure as either positive or negative, but what is indisputable is that there is heightened pressure in the public educational system as a result of the new, and very public, learning and graduation standards. It is for this reason that we report on the pressure reported (perceived or real) by the respondents.

It became clear as we visited each district that nearly all participants felt heightened pressure to perform in their respective positions. Some suggested the pressure was beneficial while others described a negative side. The pressure, when identifiable, tended to come from different sources depending on the district and the individual's position within the district (e.g., superintendent vs. teacher). In short, central office officials, especially superintendents, felt pressure from the state, their local school board and community leaders. Building leaders felt pressure from the central office officials, teachers and parents. Teachers, most often, stated that the pressure was more self-imposed than any real pressure from administration, board, or parents.

Superintendents reported more specific sources of pressure, including the simultaneous call to raise test scores while keeping the local property tax rate at a reasonable level so that the district budget could pass. This pressure to keep tax rates down typically came from board members (District N & L), local community leaders (Districts M & K), the media (District M) or community-based tax-watch groups (District R). Superintendents felt strong pressure from both their school boards and the state to show improved results on their school report cards. One superintendent pointed to the Commissioner and the Board of Re-

gents as providing the "non-negotiable" directive to superintendents to insure that all students meet the new standards, noting that it's his job to "find a way" to meet those standards. With regard to felt pressure from the media, this seemed to play a strong role in four communities. Districts M, L, N, and K spoke to the impact of media coverage and test score reporting. The most negative publicity was reported in District M.

The pressure manifests itself in both positive and negative ways, though the interpretation often varies by respondent and position. For example, while there was strong agreement that the new standards are altering practice by aligning curriculum and instruction with the state exams, some administrators, teachers, and community leaders agree with and praise the changes. Others, often teachers and a small number of community leaders, interpret the same result as unjust constraints on instruction that result in shallow and relatively meaningless curriculum. A comment from an elementary teacher in District K is telling in that the accountability standards are now defining the desired outcome in the district:

I think that it should be done that way. Is there pressure? Absolutely, but I think it comes back down to the accountability aspect of it. The standards checklist that we have to check at the end of each year is a real definition of what mastery is within our district.

Teachers also had difficulty elaborating on the source of this pressure. While some teachers spoke about their pride or reputation, a deputy superintendent in another district responded to a question as to where the pressure is coming from and how it gets transferred from central office to the classroom:

Well it feels like God some days. You know the State Ed Department tells us, so we tell [teachers]. Because certainly, if our 8th grade scores don't get better this year, I'll feel it, the superintendent will feel it, the board will feel it. We're going to share that wealth. The teachers are going to feel it.

Administrators and teachers who applaud the State Board of Regents and the state education commissioner for their leadership in meaningful school reform suggest that the changes are profoundly affecting the education of children. An administrator from District N lauded the new assessments for "require[ing] administrators and

teachers . . . to be more accountable and do a better job instructionally across the board for all kids.” A teacher in District K argued, “I feel like it’s a good test to teach towards. You know it’s not multiple choice, . . . it teaches higher level thinking skills and . . . I’m pleased about that.” Another District K teacher, who teaches English/Language Arts Academic Intervention Services, added:

I’m very pleased to see that graphic organizers are being used more and that was certainly encouraged by the way the [elementary] ELA [exam] was set up. Children . . . in our building have been weak in writing skills and I think the English language arts as well as math . . . have required the children to do more writing and we’ve really addressed their writing needs more.

In this sense this teacher exemplifies why the standards are important and offers tangible reasons why. Similarly, a District L teacher interprets the result of pressure on mathematics in a positive light:

By raising the bar a little bit, [the standards have] helped us to push the kids a little bit more. And I think that’s good. Most of the kids seem to be able to meet that standard. I think they’re learning a lot more, they’re able to express themselves a lot better. They’re finding ways to answer questions not only using Math but they’re bringing English in too because they realize that they can answer questions with not only an equation but a paragraph. So I think that the standard, raising the standards has helped a lot of kids learn.

An administrator in District N puts the pressure in a different context; again the interpretation can be positive or negative. He states pressure comes not from the need to perform, as conveyed from central office leaders, but from the amount of time and resources available to evaluate and alter existing curricular and organizational structures. In other words, it is the addition of important responsibilities to an already busy set of tasks that generates the pressure. Some suggest, however, that the intense focus on the curricular and organizational changes brought about by the standards organizes and prioritizes administrators’ responsibilities.

In contrast, numerous teachers and administrators shared first-hand accounts of the effects of the “unrealistic” expectations and increased pressure to succeed in school. Some describe the increasing rates at which students drop out

of school, anorexia, and acting out in classrooms. An urban principal, also from District M, sums up much of what others told us:

The higher standards put a lot of stress on kids nowadays. Kids can’t be kids anymore and three things are happening. [1] You’re having kids drop out of school or going for a GED. [2] We have discipline problems that are directly related to not being able to see any success in their schooling . . . or [3] those kids that are not a discipline problem, they just give up.

In summary, we reiterate our claim that three issues—perception of the major issues facing their district; agreement with the belief that all children can learn; and the ubiquitous perception of pressure—shape and constrain local decisions among educators as to how they respond to changes in the learning and graduation standards. It can be argued, that the major original source of these issues is driven by the new and heightened expectations set by the State.

### **Programmatic Responses and Strategies**

The remainder of this study details how districts are reorganizing, building capacity and managing resources to meet the new standards. Three categories of activity seem to capture the core responses among the districts we studied. The three categories are Academic Intervention Services with attention to special education, dropout management and its relationship to alternative education programs like the GED.

#### *Academic Intervention Services*

In the districts we studied, the most prevalent strategy for organizing instruction to assist all students in meeting the higher standards is termed Academic Intervention Services (AIS).<sup>11</sup> We found evidence for the use of this term and practice in every district. For example, AIS positions are either brand new positions or a new version of Title 1 teachers (particularly at the elementary grades). District K reportedly added five and one half new positions, all of which are linked to the AIS programs. District L added two new AIS positions, while not making any reductions. The school board in District N approved twelve new AIS positions recently. Generically, the AIS instructional format takes one of two forms. The more prevalent organizational form is to add on instructional time, often in the form of additional class periods of instruction in a given sub-

ject area in place of a study hall or art class. The less prevalent form is where a substitute version of an academic class replaces the regular offering. We call these two organizational forms Supplementary AIS and Supplanting AIS.

One model for AIS programming, which we term supplemental, is found in four districts (L, R, M and G). In this model, AIS classroom instruction is in addition to the regular Math and English classes.<sup>12</sup> Students initially take the regular English and Math courses, but if they begin to show signs of failure, they are placed into an AIS class that replaces a study hall or elective in their weekly schedule. In the 2000/2001 academic year many students in several districts were taking two English classes and/or two math classes (one regular education and one AIS). There is concern, however, that in the coming years as more exams are required to graduate, how schools will find the time to offer both regular and AIS classes in multiple subject areas (e.g., math, English, science, history). Given the apparent permanence of this specific state requirement, finding the time may involve the elimination of elective courses and/or after-school activities many students find motivating and enjoyable.

While this brief description of AIS programming reflects the generic practices and scheduling in the districts we studied, a closer inspection reveals differences in the application of supplementary AIS. In District K, AIS programming appears to be an extension of special education services in that it serves both traditional special education students and non-classified students in need of extra support. There is a push, at least from District K's central office, to reduce the number of classified special education students. This serves to reduce meetings and paperwork, thereby increasing the instructional time available to special education professionals. This strategy also makes it significantly easier for regular-education teachers to refer non-special education students for additional help. At the elementary level, District K has hired two "basic skills" teachers who work with students one class period a day in an area of need. This instruction in Math or English is in addition to the regular elementary instructional time in the subject areas. At the secondary level, pre-existing remedial teachers were converted to full-time (and certified) resource room teachers. Similarly, District L also refined its previous remedial programs in the creation of its AIS program.

In District M, the placement of students into AIS programming strongly relates to the release of the 8th-grade test scores. Several administrators spoke about the problem of scheduling 9th graders and having to guess which students would have to be provided with supplementary AIS courses. In practice, it was not uncommon for students to be pulled from electives (e.g., art, band) in late October when just-released 8th grade test scores identified students scoring at Level 1 or 2 who are required to receive AIS services. This caused much frustration, disruption, and angst among staff and students. Students received an additional class period of instruction per subject area per four-day cycle. The District uses a combination of pull-out and push-in services for its special education and AIS students. District M has effectively lengthened its school day for many students by altering its teacher contract, thus allowing more flexible starting and ending times to the teacher workday. This allows additional time for AIS services before and after the regular school day. The junior high school recently began an after-school bus to allow students to stay after school with volunteer teachers to receive extra instruction. An expanded summer school plays a major role; the District estimates that this helps to keep 20% of the students at grade level.

The idea behind AIS in District R is to insure that students can participate in their regular curriculum throughout the day but still receive the assistance they need to succeed after regular school hours. This enables students to remain "heterogeneously grouped" in most instances, and avoids the "real threat" of a self-contained AIS program. Again, a late bus is provided twice a week for elementary children and everyday for middle and high school students. Some AIS programming is offered during the day in 15-minute segments between the academic "blocks" and is housed in resource rooms. Six-week summer "camps" are also available for elementary and middle school students.

The second general model for AIS is to hire additional AIS teachers (former Title One teachers or aides) to teach separate AIS courses in English or Math that supplant the regular versions of these classes for low achieving students. For instance, Districts N and K generated a separate tier of AIS courses from the "regular" classes. Taught by certified teachers, these classes serve students who are unsuccessful in the mainstream. This practice



seems to serve multiple purposes. First, it streamlines the instruction in the regular classes by removing “low achieving” students (a source of frustration for some in Districts L and R). It also appears that the AIS classes become the “answer” for students with behavior problems in the regular classes. The AIS classes, it is argued, have smaller class sizes than do regular classes and better serve the individual needs of the students.

District N reports three strands (most respondents were careful to not call these “tracks”) in their high school: remedial (or Focus), average, and accelerated (or Challenge). The old Target program, a one-year high school program in District N aimed at providing on-task instruction within smaller class sizes for low performing students, had been expanded into a series of “Focus” classes in grades 2–12. Focus classes are subject-specific (e.g., English, Science, Math, and Social Studies). With no more than 18 students per class, and no more than six classified as having special needs, these AIS students are placed in Focus classes based on various performance measures. Certified subject area teachers lead Focus classes in partnership with either a certified special education teacher or a certified reading teacher. Replacing the former Honors English and Social Studies track, “Challenge” courses are offered to all students willing to commit to more rigorous curricula. This change was prompted by an investigation into the relative underperformance of Honors students on the state assessments. Honors courses only served a select population of students, usually those tracked since the 7th grade. Other AIS services include summer school, “student assistance labs,” stretch courses, and a voluntary after-school period for extra help.

We found limited evidence that an informal goal of AIS classes (either the supplanting or supplemental model) is to reduce the number of students classified as special education students. One motivator is to reduce the amount of paperwork, meetings, and costs associated with identifying and classifying a child into special education services. The cost savings (particularly the time of the special education teachers) can then be reallocated into improved “push-in” programs for the remaining special education students and additional non-classified services provided by special education teachers for regular education students. But these observations are neither definitive nor universal. In fact, we found conflicting motiva-

tions for this practice. On one hand, as districts reduce the number of special education students, they are able to increase resources (i.e., time, expertise) for non-classified low achieving students. On the other hand, one strategy used by some districts to increase passing rates is to take advantage of the “testing modifications” allowed classified students. Special education students may be placed in a distraction-free environment, allowed additional time, and/or have exam questions read to them by a teacher depending on the requirements of the students’ Individual Education Plans (IEPs). If a student is not classified, however, no such modifications are allowed.

### *Dropouts and G.E.D. Management*

District personnel revealed intriguing responses to our interest in “at risk” students and the new learning and graduation standards. Four of the five superintendents and an array of high school principals shared a “strategy” of shifting students on the verge of dropping out to GED programs (typically run by intermediate school districts called BOCES). This practice allows districts to report that the student “transferred” and did not drop out. The end result is that state dropout data does not capture transfers to GED or alternative schools. To be counted as a dropout, districts need to completely lose track of a student. This was commonly discussed as students “disappearing.” This finding may help to explain our finding of a lack of a significant correlation between an increase in Regents participation rates and dropout rates. It also mirrors the relatively flat trend lines of the state’s officially reported dropout rates across districts (See Figure 3).

We found evidence of this practice in four of our five districts (District K reported no dropout/GED issues or prevention programs). While no respondent admitted to pushing students toward this path (i.e., GED versus continued high school work), several administrators across the districts made certain that students understood their options and that earning a GED was one. Several administrators stated, earning the GED “is better than nothing.” One Deputy Superintendent noted that it was common “to put a student in a car and drive him downtown” to the GED center. By comparison, Districts N and R operate their own GED programs for students. District N actually recruited for their GED program by “calling back” students who had dropped out. District R created a GED



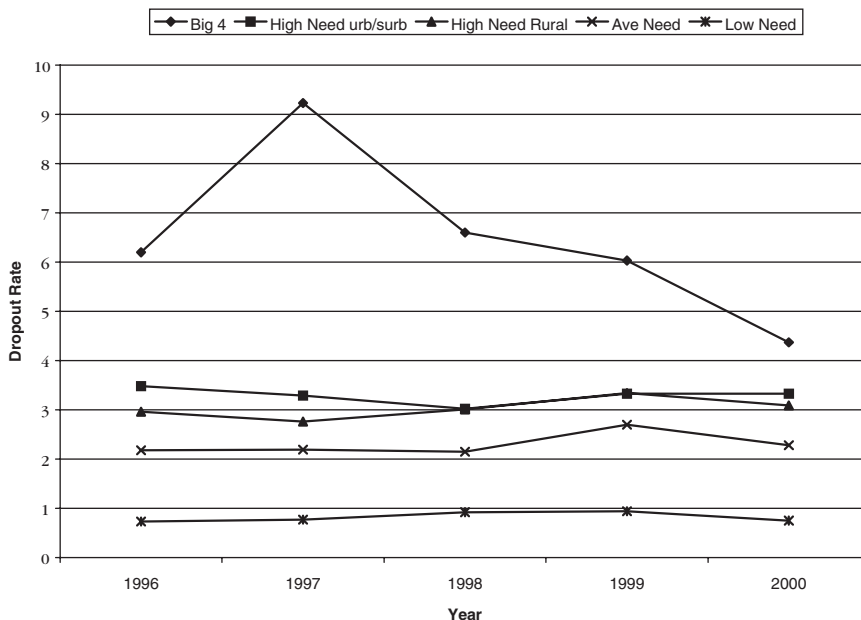


FIGURE 3. *Dropout Rates by District Type, 1996–2000.*

program in the high school basement. Both programs separate the regular students from the GED students and both are reported to reduce the dropout rate of the respective districts.

The nature of GED programming in these four districts raises important issues about interactions between performance measures and organizational reform. Whereas the identification of at-risk students begins in the early elementary grades, we found evidence that teachers advise students of the GED option as early as 8th grade. AIS programming requires teachers to identify students who are at risk of not meeting new high school graduation requirements. These identifications, taking place at the elementary and middle school levels as well as the early high school years, are the avenues that link poor performing students to AIS services.

The second issue, and potentially more controversial, is a function of how dropout rates are calculated and reported. Two superintendents and several high school principals reported that as long as students are moved into a GED program, they are reported as a “transfer” and not a dropout. This has the result of reducing dropout rates as reported on the school report cards, and removing each of these students (typically low performing) from the denominator of all exam-passing rates. For example, District N recently

“called back” 40 students who had “disappeared” to enroll them in an in-house GED program. District R, who previously had only been allotted 23 slots in the BOCES-run GED program, recently began its own program and immediately placed 68 students. These additional 45 students could, in effect, reduce the reported dropout rate by 2.5% a year. District M, while not running its own program, delivers students on the verge of dropping out directly to the BOCES GED program. District L reported that the transfer option to alternative settings including GED programs was once reserved for students considered to pose a safety risk to other students and staff. However, the practice is sometimes now used for students at risk of not completing the requirements for the Regents diploma. Furthermore, given the ease with which the “disappeared” are suddenly contacted and encouraged into educational settings also reflects the new tension involved in the balance of serving all students in an era of public accountability.

### *Contractual Issues*

Our interviews included an assessment of how contractual issues impact student-learning opportunities. This is an issue where there are clear discrepancies, on average, between teachers and administrators. Administrators commonly be-

moaned the “shackles” of the teachers’ contracts and their “paralyzing” effects on administrators’ abilities to provide students sufficient opportunities for additional learning. Administrators likened the teachers’ workday to an iron cage, noting the importance of the bells at 7:23 AM and 2:45 PM, and “the 182 days of the school year.” In one particularly contentious district, a district administrator stated:

We would like to extend our school day just so that it’s comparable with the other districts in [this] county. We have the shortest day in [this] county. It’s a contractual issue. These teachers will fight tooth and nail.

Many teachers, on the other hand, saw little impact of the contract and simply requested that they be compensated for time worked. If administration wants them to work late afternoons or over the summer, “just pay us.” District K offered to pay an hourly wage over the summer, though teachers requested approximately 1/190th of their annual salary for each additional day worked. There is certainly variation on this issue across districts and even within districts over time (e.g., during times with unsettled contracts). In fact, many administrators and teachers spoke about the dedicated teacher who commonly works well beyond the contract. One suburban teacher described the impact of the contract in this way:

Academic Intervention Services, they wanted to extend our day [to provide AIS] and the union won’t let that happen . . . I think on the one hand to have the district who (sic) wants more from us without giving us more and the union. [O]n the other hand [the union] tends to be a little anal but I think in that way the union has good protection. The contract is a good protection from the district telling us that we need to do more without paying us more.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In describing broad trends across New York State school districts and micro-level attitudes and strategies in five school districts, we presented a complex set of interactions, agents, pressures, and contextual factors that intersect during the earliest years of a major effort at education policy reform. We now attempt to make sense of the wide array of findings by linking together the interrelated issues from the trend analyses, casework, and the extant literature. We frame our discussion by the

three conceptual areas reviewed above: impact of state policy and community standards on local school practice; school district organization and practice; and outcomes and consequences of increasing state education standards.

In the face of new and clear expectations from New York State that *all* districts move *all* students into a set of college preparatory courses and exams, we documented school districts making steady progress in the late 1990s leading up to 2000–2001, the first year of the standards phase-in. Of course, the initial phase in was no surprise to the districts as the State Board of Regents made the run up the implementation very public beginning in 1996. From a macro perspective, the change in state policy clearly stimulated aggregate change in local districts outcomes. However, the qualitative analyses deepen our understanding of these outcomes with mixed evidence of real change in district, school, and classroom practice (i.e., strong impact), as well as district gaming and reporting tricks (i.e., weak impact).

In terms of Malen’s (2003) basic question as to what impact the current policy changes are having on local school districts, the preponderance of our findings hint towards a strong effect by narrowing the conversations (e.g., Firestone et al., 1998; Grant, 2000a) within districts and across educators to discussion and action related to the new curriculum and assessment standards. In the aggregate, districts made substantial progress in moving greater numbers of students into the Regents academic program. The cases, however, provided rich insight into the role of the local communities in stimulating or muting the push to implement higher standards for all students. Moreover, the cases provide rich examples of how state reform “frames” the choices made by educators to adopt or participate in program change.

Researchers have long documented and theorized how local school leaders manage and weaken external policy influence. Administrative strategies, including the creation of loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976), decoupling organization from practice, establishing logics of confidence (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978), and adhering to the strong and socially embedded norms of practice (e.g., Metz’s “real school” and Tyack and Tobin’s “grammar of schooling”), enable schools to maintain organizational and instructional stability in the face of repeated external attempts to alter school, teacher, and student performance. Institutional

theorists argue that these strategies serve to stabilize organizations by establishing common criteria by which organizations are publicly assessed. These criteria, however, have traditionally been easily inspected and often removed from the technical core of the organization. More recently, Cibulka (1995, 1996) and Rowan and Miskel (1999) suggest that the increasingly rationalized environment of public education is focusing more attention on explicit performance outcomes—outcomes less reliant on superficial organization and more closely linked to classroom learning.

Far from being passive, many educators (administrators and teachers) in each district responded to the pressures, expectations, and regulation in ways that were active and strategic. On one end of Oliver's (1991) continuum, we found evidence of passive compliance. All districts engaged in public reporting of performance measures as mandated by the state. All districts formed committees and completed reports to meet state regulation. One case, in particular, is illustrative of how reform pressure manifests change, in ways that appear removed from the technical core of schools. One superintendent from a high performing district reported his district would be "dead" if he did not prepare a state-mandated report by the state-imposed deadline. When asked what would happen if the district did not meet the deadline, the superintendent reported he had no idea, but he just "had to get it done." These types of responses (e.g., reporting scores, assembling committees, and drafting reports for seemingly arbitrary deadlines) appear to signal what DeBray, Parson and Woodward (2001, p. 189) term "compliance without capacity." In this we find a certain hollow response in each of the districts during the early period of reform. This may indicate the superficial behavior as proposed by many authors, or the reality of how far the decision making process is from actual changes in instruction. This finding is consistent with research (Vallely, 2003) on the activity of administrators as they implemented NY State's version of comprehensive school planning between 1999–2001.

District leadership also interpreted state requirements in light of their local capacity, politics, and beliefs. In other words, not only did the educators recognize and feel the pressure from the state, but they also strategized how to implement the standards-based reforms in the context of their

local community, economy, and political arena. This occurred in each district and represents the continued local control of schools despite the very visible and intrusive arm of the state (Arum, 2000; Sipple, 2004). For example, responses to the AIS mandate and the strategic use of GED programming are illustrative examples of such strategic action driven by state-led expectations. The state education department established regulation for additional instruction for underachieving students, termed AIS, and we documented a variety of strategies to meet this goal.

Interactions among issues of fiscal resources, union contracts, and community expectations act to enable and constrain local capacity to meet state goals. District M, faced with great fiscal stress and great community need, altered their teacher contract to enable a longer school day without increasing costs. This allows additional time slots during the day for students to attend AIS classes without crimping the regular set of classes in each student's schedule. District K, under pressure from the community to maintain its high performance, hired several additional certified teachers for AIS and began supplementary AIS classes. District L (at the high school level), recognizing the limited press from the community to push all students toward high levels of achievement, worked within its traditional schedule and union contract simply converting study halls into voluntary AIS drop-in centers. District N, with weak community involvement and influence on academic issues, chose to *supplant* the regular English and mathematics classes with AIS classes for low performing students. By holding class size to a maximum of 18 students (a "soft cap" as reported by teachers), the district argued that they are meeting the AIS mandate by increasing student instructional time with smaller student to teacher ratios. This response has a relatively low fiscal impact and does not upset the balance of the middle and high performing classes. Note how the two districts (L & N) with what we term status quo expectations in their community, responded differently than the other districts. We have evidence from these two districts that the local community believes that not all kids really need a college preparatory education. Hence, the segregation of AIS students in separate classes in District N and the voluntary nature of AIS instruction in District L represent technical compliance with the state regulations though the degree to which these

practices increased the technical proficiency of the academic program for low performing students is uncertain.

In addition to between district differences, our study underscores the existence of multi-leveled policy environments for educators working in a state undergoing significant reform of its graduation standards. This is indicated by the range of pressures reported and beliefs held by various categories of educators within and across the five districts. The development and maintenance of different layers of operation in a school district is not surprising (Ogawa et al., 2003; Sipple & Killeen, 2004; Spillane, 1998) but is also an outcome of current school organization. School organization and administration typically decouples teachers from external influences, allows teachers to teach, and leaves the superintendent as the public voice and face of the school district. We found teachers reporting a more amorphous pressure to meet the standards, while superintendents consistently cite the importance of policy messages and regulation from the state. Superintendents also name intermediary actors such as employees from the regional education agencies (e.g., BOCES) as important colleagues in the transmission and interpretation of state policies and guidelines.

We also observe that district level administrators universally and strongly identify with the statement that “all children can learn at high levels,” perhaps more symbolically than anything else. However there is less agreement at the building level and among some community leaders on this belief. Teachers at the building level are concerned with more and better services for children and the limitation’s of students’ backgrounds. Yet teacher activism does not appear to be related to the feeling that “all children can learn at high levels” as many disagreed with the statement. This closely mirrors the findings of Ogawa et al. (2003) who describe the symbolic activities of superintendents as distinct from the curricular and instructional work of teachers. The seemingly universal language used by superintendents supports the argument by Goertz (2001) who stressed the phenomenon of inter-district coherence within highly regulated states.

In contrast to the state mandated AIS programming, the state did not formally suggest or mandate the use of an alternative outcome in place of the Regents’ diploma. In fact, the state has been criticized for a one-size-fits-all model of high

school academic program. Absent state (or other) influence on this issue, this study allowed examination of strategic decision-making to find a pressure release for the increasingly pressurized system. While this study does little to end the debate as to whether increasing state graduation requirements are responsible for the growing numbers of GED participants, we do offer important insight into mechanisms by which increasing state standards and maintaining a narrow definition of a dropout results in greater numbers of students leaving high schools and “transferring” to GED programs.

The clear pressure on superintendents is to increase graduation rates, keep dropout rates down, and pass the budget. As reported by the participants, failure to move students toward a Regents diploma and/or allowing increases in dropout rates—both of which are very visible indicators to the public—would bring intense pressure on the building and district leadership. In 2000–2001, we suggest GED rates were under the radar screen of the general public as most attention was directed toward dropout rates (e.g., Jacob, 2001). Evidence from our cases suggests that educators, particularly principals, were using the GED option to maintain, if not reduce, their dropout rates. Districts M, N, and R (all high need districts) were clear in their descriptions of their use of the GED option. District M reported driving students to the GED center, District R created their own in-house GED program when they couldn’t get enough slots at the regional GED center, and District R actively searched for recent dropouts they could then enroll in their own GED program. Part of this activity is, no doubt, to offer students a GED rather than have students simply dropout. However, the administrators were blunt in their plan to reduce the district’s publicly reported dropout rate. We suspect the educators understood their community’s negative connotations of a high dropout rate, but did not sense the negative ramifications of increasing the GED transfer rate. Our description of these mechanisms supports our previous finding of the lack of a relationship between increased participation in the Regents program and changes in the reported drop out rate and a possible link to the general upward trend of GED use among high school-aged individuals.

Whether these practices circumvent the push for higher standards or facilitate a productive option for students who otherwise are unlikely to

graduate can and should be debated and studied (Sipple & Killeen, 2004; Tyler, 2003). Of note, in 2003 the state of New York implemented a new set of reporting guidelines for dropouts (now called leavers) and GED transfers. The new guidelines now make clearer to the public the alternatives to graduation in relation to the proportion of the 9th grade cohort that began high school four years earlier.

In sum, the conversations our study districts were dominated by the new state standards. Seemingly, most staffing, professional development, student grouping, special education, and budget decisions were all made within the context of the heightened learning and graduation standards. Each of the superintendents used similar language and was committed to not only meeting the state standards but fully believed that their district could do so in the ensuing years. Teachers, on the other hand, were generally less optimistic and more critical of the basic notion that all children were even capable of succeeding in the academic program. These responses, however, gloss over the very real impact of local community context. We have documented variation in organizational and programmatic responses that appear somewhat related to wealth, but more importantly related to local community demands and pressures. This variation provides evidence of Malen's weak policy impact (e.g., districts N and L), but also strong policy impact by narrowing the parameters of district decision making and agendas (Fairman & Firestone, 2001; Knapp, 1997; Knapp et al., 1998).

Conceptually, our study provides evidence of how state policy continues to be shaped by institutionalized demands at the district level, though increasingly shaped by technical assessments. The institutional demands include both state regulatory and more local normative and cognitive expectations (Scott, 2000). However, the growing scope and complexity of the learning assessments appears to be driving technical modifications in academic and instructional programs. Taken together, the environment in which school districts and their personnel are functioning in the early years of a major change in expectations is increasingly complex. With the added complexity, however, comes a tangible focusing of attention on underperforming students, the students some argue have often been ignored or left behind (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). We pro-

vide a window into the range of opportunities afforded under achieving students in the face of heightened academic demands. Some of the opportunities, such as a well developed academic intervention services and additional staff development may value to their academic program. The value of other opportunities, such as the transfer to a GED program, is more uncertain.

## Conclusion

It might be too soon to draw broad conclusions about significant policy change in New York State, the intensity of response as districts work to comply, and the efficacy of the policy and response for students. Our study does offer insight into the years leading up to the implementation of the new standards and the early phase of implementation. The incentives to comply with the mandates may have moved a large number of mediocre performing students, heretofore not challenged with the Regents program, into Regents' course participation. However, the ensuing years and the full phase-in of the standards will be critical to observe, as the capacities of local districts will no doubt be stretched beyond the initial attention to English and mathematics coursework.

We do conclude that the state has set an ambitious agenda and established broad parameters for local district activity. The state has done this without consolidating all decision making on program and organizational design. Thus the five districts in this study are responding to the charge from the state with a variety of strategies and priorities. These responses often reflect local community capacities and interests, but they are all responding to the state defined goals of pushing all students toward a college preparatory diploma. Despite the progress documented thus far, we raise questions about what contextual features shape local response, and how equitable this set of reforms are given the differential opportunities and capabilities to respond at the local district level (See Sipple & Killeen, 2004). One explicit goal of the new standards in NYS and elsewhere is to provide a more equitable set of learning opportunities (and outcomes) for all students. While the broad trends are promising, the details at the ground level are worth paying attention as they provide researchers, policymakers, and practitioners with insight into the potential for improvement and greater equality.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The five exams are mandated by June of 2004, but students can pass these at the 55% level. In 2005, the passing grade for each exam was set to return to 65% from the temporary five-year drop to 55%. A recent policy change by the Board of Regents pushes back by two years the return to the 65% passing rate.

<sup>2</sup> This study is among the first in a series of articles from the authors that documents organizational changes and responses to state learning and graduation standards across a representative sample of New York State School districts.

<sup>3</sup> Publicly available from the NY State Education Department, <http://www.nysed.gov>.

<sup>4</sup> The New York City data come from the School Report Card Data File as well as from data collected by Professor Leanna Stiefel (NYU) and Patrice Iatarola. The participation and performance data for the special education student population was prepared as a special extract for this study and is not publicly available. We wish to thank the New York State Department of Education assistance in gaining access to and interpreting the state data.

<sup>5</sup> For example: If a grade 9–12 high school has 1,000 students, the AGE is 1000/4 or 250 students.

<sup>6</sup> A dropout is defined by the state of New York, as “any student who left school prior to graduation for any reason except death and who, to the best of the school’s knowledge, did not enter another school or high school equivalency preparation program.”

<sup>7</sup> The site visits took place over four months. Participating in the site visits were two of the authors, five graduate students, a director of Special Education for a school district, a middle school department chair, and, for one visit, the executive Director of the New York State Rural Schools Program and a faculty member from Vassar College.

<sup>8</sup> Some interviews were conducted in small groups.

<sup>9</sup> Our analyses included the tabulation of the number of respondents who mentioned each major issue and the number of total references to a particular major issue. The two tabulations are highly correlated and as such are essentially interchangeable in terms of assessing the range of major issues faced by participating districts.

<sup>10</sup> These include PTA leaders, chamber presidents and school board members. In order to conceal the identity of the community members we interviewed, we necessarily need to be vague as to whom we attribute these statements.

<sup>11</sup> The use of the term Academic Intervention Services, or AIS, was used in each district we studied. This is surprising given the very recent (one year old) directive from the state requiring AIS services for students who are not passing the Regents exams or are scoring at Levels 1 or 2 on the grade 1–4 or 5–8 exams. While the

programs are often revised versions of previously implemented remediation services, very few respondents used the term remediation.

<sup>12</sup> As of the spring of 2001, the only two Regents exams required for graduation are English and one Math. Thus the initial AIS programming in the districts is targeted on English and Math. It is expected that other subject areas will be added in the coming years as the other exams become required for graduation.

## Appendix

### Interview Protocols

#### *Protocol for Structured Interviews at the Building Level*

(A similar, though more lengthy, protocol was used for central office officials.)

### Teacher Interviews

#### Respondents’ Background and Position

1) How long have you held this current position? Briefly summarize your prior positions, over the past ten years?

2) What are the most important issues and events facing this district today and in the coming years?

### Institutional Protocol

#### (1st half of Teacher Interview)

#### History of Organizational Reform and Decision Making Frameworks

#### 3) Regulatory Issues:

a) What are the most influential state regulations impacting student achievement?

b) How are you informed of these regulations?

c) To what extent have contractual issues with teachers influenced student achievement?

#### 4) Resource Reallocation:

a) To what extent have resources been re-allocated in your school in order to educate all students? (Listen for respondent’s conceptions of resources and conceptions of reallocation.)

b) What other fiscal issues have either constrained or enhanced your school reforms?

#### 5) Community Context

a) In this community, what individuals or organizations most influence your professional practice as a teacher?

b) Beyond this community, what individuals or organizations most influence your professional practice as a teacher?

## Technical Protocol

### (2nd half of Teacher Interview)

School Response to the standards-based reform movement towards full Regents testing and achievement for all students:

6) We would like to inquire about changes in teacher assignments with respect to Standards.

a) To what degree have staffing patterns changed in your school or district changed in direct response to standards reform?

b) Have certain positions been “cashed in” for others?

c) What issues constrain teacher assignment here in your school?

7) We would like to inquire about changes in student assignment and tracking with respect to standards reform.

a) How has the grouping of students in your school changed since 1995?

b) Are students grouped differently in different subjects?

c) Has your approach to special needs students changed since 1995? Specifically. . . .

d) How are children with learning difficulties (LD) grouped? (Mainstreamed? Heterogeneous groups? Tutors?)

e) How are LEP children accommodated (are there bilingual classes? ESL classes? Pull-out programs or tutors?)

f) How are Title I or low achievement students served?

## Closure

Is there anything you would like to add?

Do you have any questions for me/us?

*Note.* We include only the protocols for Teachers. The principal and central office protocols are available upon request.

## References

- Arum, R. (2000). School and communities: Ecological and institutional dimensions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 395–418.
- Bishop, J. H., & Mane, F. (2001). The impacts of minimum competency exam graduation requirements on college attendance and early labor market success of disadvantaged students. In M. L. Kornhaber (Ed.), *Raising standards or raising barriers? Inequality and high-stakes testing in public education* (pp. 51–84). New York: Century Foundation Press.
- Boesel, D., Alsalam, N., & Smith, T. M. (1998). *Educational and labor market performance of GED recipients*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Chaplin, D. (1999). *GEDs for teenagers: Are there unintended consequences?*: The Urban Institute. Retrieved July 7, 2004 from <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/GED.pdf>.
- Cibulka, J. G. (1995). The institutionalization of public schools: The decline of legitimating myths and the politics of organizational instability. In R. T. Ogawa (Ed.), *Advances in research and theories of school management and educational policy* (Vol. 3, pp. 123–157).
- Cibulka, J. G. (1996). The reform and survival of American public schools: An institutional perspective. In H. B. Mawhinney (Ed.), *The politics of education and the new institutionalism*. Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Cimbricz, S. (2002). State-mandated testing and teachers’ beliefs and practice. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 10(2), Retrieved December 20, 2003 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n12.ht>.
- Cohen, D. K., & Hill, H. G. (2000). Instructional policy and classroom performance: The mathematics reform in California. *Teachers College Record*, 102(2), 294–343.
- Cuban, L. (1998). How schools change reforms: Redefining reform success and failure. *Teachers College Record*, 99(3), 453–477.
- Cunningham, L. (2003). Rethinking the role of the community. In W. L. Boyd & D. Miretzky (Eds.), *American educational governance on trial: Change and challenges*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- DeBray, E., Parson, G., & Woodworth, K. (2001). Patterns of response in four high schools under state accountability policies in Vermont and New York. In S. Furhman (Ed.), *From the capital to the classroom: Standards-based reform in the states* (pp. 170–192). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Deschenes, S., Cuban, L., & Tyack, D. B. (2001). Mismatch: Historical perspectives on schools and students who don’t fit them. *Teachers College Record*, 103(4), 525.
- DiMaggio, P. J. (1988). Interest and agency in institutional theory. In L. G. Zucker (Ed.), *Institutional patterns in organizations: Culture and environments* (pp. 3–21). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- Elmore, R. F., Peterson, P. L., & McCarthey, S. J. (1996). *Restructuring in the classroom: Teaching, learning, and school organization* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Fairman, J. C., & Firestone, W. A. (2001). The district role in state assessment policy. In S. H. Fuhrman (Ed.), *From the capital to the classroom: Standards-based reform in the states* (pp. 124–147). Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education.

- Firestone, W. A. (1989). Using reform: Conceptualizing district initiative. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 11*(2), 151–164.
- Firestone, W. A., Mayrowez, D., & Fairman, J. (1998). Performance based assessment and instructional change: The effects of testing in Maine and Maryland. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 20*(2), 95–113.
- Fuhrman, S. (Ed.). (2001). *From the capital to the classroom*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fuhrman, S. H. (Ed.). (1993). *Designing coherent educational policy: Improving the system*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fuhrman, S., & O'Day, J. A. (1996). *Rewards and reform: Creating educational incentives that work* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Goertz, G. E. (2001). Standards-based accountability: Horse trade or horse whip? In S. H. Fuhrman (Ed.), *From the capitol to the classroom: Standards-based reform in the states* (pp. 39–59). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Goertz, M. E., & Duffy, M. C. (2001). *Assessment and accountability across the 50 states*: Consortium for Policy Research in Education—Policy Briefs.
- Grant, S. G. (2000a). An uncertain lever: The influence of state-level testing in New York on teaching social studies. *Teachers College Record*.
- Grant, S. G. (2000b). Teachers and tests: Exploring teacher's perceptions of changes in the New York state testing program. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 8*(14).
- Haney, W. (2000). The myth of the Texas miracle in education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 8*(41).
- Jackson, P. W. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. New York: Holt.
- Jacob, B. (2001). Getting tough: The impact of high school graduation exams. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 23*(2), 99–121.
- Knapp, M. S. (1997). Between systemic reforms and the mathematics and science classroom: The dynamics of innovation, implementation, and professional learning. *Review of Educational Research, 67*(2), 227–276.
- Knapp, M. S., Bamberg, J. D., Ferguson, M. C., & Hill, P. T. (1998). Converging reforms and the working lives of frontline professionals in schools. *Education Policy, 12*(4), 397–418.
- Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. H. (2002). Teacher sorting and the plight of urban schools: A descriptive analysis. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 24*(1), 37–62.
- Lortie, D. C. (1975). *School teacher: A sociological study*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Malen, B. (2003). Tightening the grip? The impact of state activism on local school systems. *Education Policy, 17*(2), 195–216.
- Mertens, D. M. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative & qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Metz, M. H. (1990). Real school; a universal drama and disparate experience. In D. E. Mitchell & M. E. Goertz (Eds.), *Education politics for the new century* (pp. 75–91). New York: Falmer Press.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*(2), 340–363.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1978). The structure of educational organizations. In M. W. Meyer (Ed.), *Environments and organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Meyer, J. W., Scott, R., & Deal, T. E. (1983). Institutional and technical sources of organizational structure: Explaining the structure of educational organizations. In W. R. Scott (Ed.), *Organizational environments: Rationality and ritual*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Meyer, L., Orloffsky, G. F., Skinner, R. A., & Spicer, S. (2002). The state of the states. In quality counts 2002: Building blocks for success (a report on education in the 50 states by the editorial projects in education). *Education Week, 21*(17), 68–92.
- Monk, D. H., Sipple, J. W., & Killeen, K. (2001). *Adoption and adaptation: New York state school districts' responses to state imposed high school graduation requirements: An eight-year retrospective*. Albany, NY: New York State Educational Finance Research Consortium Retrieved July 7, 2004 from <http://www.albany.edu/edfin>.
- Monk, D. H., & Hussain, S. (1998). Resource allocation implications of increased high school graduation expectations. In *Educational finance to support high learning standards* (pp. 26–55). Albany, NY: New York State Board of Regents.
- NCES. (2002). Table 106: General education development (GED) test takers, and number of distribution of credentials issued, by age: 1971 to 2001. In *Digest of Education Statistics*. Washington, DC: U.D. Department of Education.
- Ogawa, R. T., Sandholtz, J. H., Martinez-Flores, M., & Scribner, S. P. (2003). The substantive and symbolic consequences of a district's standards-based curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(1), 147–176.
- Oliver, C. (1991). Strategic processes to institutional processes. *Academy of Management Review, 16*(1), 145–179.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Rowan, B., & Miskel, C. G. (1999). Institutional theory and the study of educational organizations. In

- J. Murphy & K. S. Louis (Eds.), *The handbook of educational administration* (2nd ed., pp. 359–383). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Scott, W. R. (2000). *Institutions and organizations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Selznick, P. (1949). *TVA and the grass roots: A study of politics and organization*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sipple, J. W. (1999). Institutional constraints on business involvement in K–12 education policy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36(3), 447–488.
- Sipple, J. W. (2004). Local anchors versus state levers in state-led school reform: Identifying the community around public schools. In W. K. Hoy & C. G. Miskel (Eds.), *Educational administration, policy, and reform: Research and measurement* (Vol. 3). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Sipple, J. W., & Killeen, K. (2004). Context, capacity and concern: A district-level analysis of the implementation of standards-based reform. *Education Policy*, 18(3), pp 456–490.
- Skinner, R. A., & Staresina, L. N. (2004). The state of the states. In quality counts 2004: Special education in an era of standards (a report on education in the 50 states by the editorial projects in education). *Education Week*, 23(17), 68–92.
- Spillane, J. P. (1998). State policy and the non-monolithic nature of the local school district: Organizational and professional consequences. *American Educational Research Journal*, 35(1), 33–63.
- Spillane, J. P., & Zeuli, J. S. (1999). Reform and teaching: Exploring patterns of practice in the context of national and state mathematics reforms. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 21(1), 1–27.
- Tyack, D., & Tobin, W. (1993). The “grammar” of schooling: Why has it been so hard to change? *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(3), 453–479.
- Tyler, J. H. (2003). Economic benefits of the GED: Lessons from recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 73(3), 369.
- Valley, M. J. (2003). *New York state’s comprehensive district education planning: A script for an institutionalized response or a lever for real instructional change?* Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
- Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21, 1–19.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## Authors

JOHN W. SIPPLE is Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Cornell University, 421 Kennedy Hall, Ithaca, NY 14850; jws28@cornell.edu. His areas of specialization are organizational studies, administration, and policy.

KIERAN KILLEEN is Assistant Professor, Education and Social Services, University of Vermont, 85 S. Prospect Street, Waterman, Burlington, VT 05405-0160; kkillen@zoo.uvm.edu. His areas of specialization are educational finance and administration.

DAVID H. MONK is Professor, College of Education, Pennsylvania State University, 275 Chambers Building, University Park, PA 16802-3206; dhm6@psu.edu. His areas of specialization are educational finance and administration.

Manuscript Received July 25, 2002

Revision Received January 28, 2004

Accepted February 20, 2004